

## [Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / A Revelatory Tour of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Forgotten Teachings

I'm Ezra Klein, this is the Ezra Klein Show.

There is this paradox in how we treat Martin Luther King Jr.

First, everyone in America reveres him.

Left and right, there are holidays named after him, there are statues of him, streets named after him, and almost no one really reads him.

Man wrote many books, wrote many essays, most of them are forgotten, few of them are taught.

And maybe that's not strange at all.

Maybe it's not an accident at all.

King is so convenient as a myth, as a uniting figure, and he is so challenging even today as a philosopher.

But that is one of the things he was, he was a philosopher.

In recent years, there's been a counter narrative about King trying to push back on this.

And it admits part of what we leave out.

It emphasizes the positions he held that are still very far from the American mainstream, his critique of American militarism, his advocacy of a universal basic income.

This argument wants to enlist King, and I think it's mostly correct in this, as a man of the left.

But King's thought is challenging if you're on the left too.

He's focused in ways very few are today, and in ways many are very uncomfortable with today, on how political action changes the person taking the action.

He is not all about systemic solution.

He is also about individual change.

He is focused on questions of virtue.

He's relentless in interrogating what actually counts as victory when we engage in political action with and against each other.

And he believes that when we are engaging in political action with and against each other, we should be trying to find victory, at least victories he defines it.

Brandon Terry is a professor at Harvard University, and he's a co-editor of To Shape a New World, essays on the political philosophy of Martin Luther King Jr.

I loved this book.

One of Terry's projects is to force a confrontation with what King actually said and believed, rather than what he's come to represent.

And that confrontation, it is so worth having.

He is so challenging and worth reading and worth struggling with today.

What he writes is so relevant today.

This is one of those podcasts I'm going to be thinking about for a very, very long time to come.

As always, my email, Ezra Klein Show at nytimes.com.

Brandon Terry, welcome to the show.

Thank you so much, Ezra.

It's an honor to be here.

Move this lovely line at the beginning of the book, where you say that we treat Martin Luther King Jr. with this, quote, dual phenomena of ritual celebration and intellectual

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marginalization.

What do you mean by that?

Well, there's this puzzle when we think about somebody like Martin Luther King Jr.

And it's that, on the one hand, we have a national holiday devoted to him, an imposing monument on the hallowed space of the National Mall.

He's invoked in all manner of political speeches from across the political spectrum, probably the most famous African American of the 20th century.

But at the same time, if you ask even really well educated people, they often don't know that he'd written five major books, that he's a systematic theologian with sustained interest in political philosophy, who's written lots and lots of things, incisive things on some of the most pressing political and ethical matters.

And the question is, how can those two things stand in connection?

And what it occurred to me is that it's partly related to how we tell the story of the civil rights movement and particularly how we tell King's role in the civil rights movement.

So I've described it as a kind of romantic narrative, one that's about unities in the process of becoming, a kind of calling together of Americans to transcend racial division and come together in a kind of unifying way, a more perfect union, as a kind of transcendence of essential American goodness over transitory American evils.

And when we tell the story that way, unfortunately, not only is it mythic, but it trains us to treat King as the kind of person who's not doing any original political thinking.

What he's doing is calling us to be true to who we always already were.

And when you treat him like that, the thing that becomes most interesting about him is not his thought, it's not the way he challenged us to think about violence, it's not the way he challenges us to think about segregation, both de facto and de jure, it's not how he challenges us to think about economic justice.

The thing that's interesting about him starts to be his rhetoric or his tactics, the way in which he pushes people or frames arguments to call us to be true to who we always already were.

That's a real problem because it evades the most incisive, challenging and generative contributions that his public philosophy makes for our era.

So we take King and the Civil Rights Movement as a validation of America, not as a critique or even a conversation about it.

I think that's right, that it gets conscripted into a story that's ultimately affirming about the adequacy of our constitutional order, the trajectory of our institutions, the essential goodness of our national character.

We often hear politicians use this rhetoric of, this is not who we are.

And King wants to say something different, I think, he wants to say that we're both of these things, we're a society with what he called the congenital deformity of racism, that it's shot through many of our deepest institutions and structural arrangements.

And because it has not been redressed on the scale that it would have to be to achieve true justice, it festers, it's a rot, it's a challenge that every generation is called on to pick up and try to do better than their forebears.

Do you think the legacy or the popular understanding of nonviolence is actually part of this problem?

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And by that I mean that the way I was taught about it, the way I think it's taught, nonviolence becomes not so much a philosophy, but a kind of almost inhuman forbearance and discipline, that to the extent you think about it, it is in terms of what people like King and many others of course, were able to endure and it almost becomes a physical feat, as opposed to a philosophical one.

I think that's right, there's a way in which the philosophy of nonviolence gets painted even in King's time as a kind of extreme, purest pacifism.

And part of that is the connection with Gandhi, although I think it's a radical misunderstanding of Gandhi as well, but it's a way of imagining the commitment to nonviolence as related to passivity, as related to the performance of suffering for pity.

These are things that King never endorsed.

For him, the idea of passive resistance was a misnomer.

He helped coin the phrase direct action, he and other members of the civil rights generation, that nonviolence is aggressive.

It's an aggressive attack on injustice, an aggressive form of non-cooperation with domination.

It's about trying to wedge yourself into the machinery of domination to prevent its adequate functioning, to try to force or coerce your fellow citizens to stop and take stock of what kind of injustices are being unfurled in their name.

And it does so on the presumption that politics involves coercion, especially for King, who had a pretty tragic sense of human nature, that politics is going to involve confrontation with great evil, that it's not a Pollyanna's view about what we're all capable of if we just turn our eye toward God in the right way.

We're always going to live with evil, and we always are going to be called to confront it.

We just need to do it in ways that won't unleash a further chain of social evil and bitterness and revenge and retaliation.

And King thought nonviolence was the only weapon that could cut and heal at the same time.

I think one way to split apart these views of nonviolence or something that helped me do it when I spent a while studying it a few years back, and I really recommend spending some time in nonviolent philosophy because I don't think there's almost anything I've ever read that is as challenging to the way I think about the world.

But Gandhi has this line where he says that if you can't practice nonviolence, that quote, retaliation or resistance unto death is the second best, though a long way off from the first.

Cowardice is impotence, worse than violence.

So this idea that if you can't be nonviolent, it's better to be violent than to be a coward doing nothing.

I think gets it something important.

Can you help unpack that?

Sure, one way to bring it back to King is that early in his career, he was engaged in a debate with a man named Robert Williams who wrote a book that was very popular amongst the Black Power generation called *Negros with Guns*.

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And he gets the title.

The title is a slight adjustment of a slur that was said to him when he showed up at a pool, a public pool with a group of armed Black men as support for integrationist demonstration. And anyway, King is involved in this debate with Robert Williams and part about the legitimacy of self-defense.

And King in his response sort of expresses confusion because he says, look, in your home, in your private personhood, self-defense is perfectly justified.

No one disagrees with that.

He thinks it doesn't even really need any elaborate moral justification.

It's something that's basically assumed in all of the major moral philosophies that he's aware of.

He says that the really interesting question, however, is how to organize a sustained successful challenge to structural injustice.

And for King, that requires something that blends militant resistance and a higher order ethical practice that can point the way toward peaceful reconciliation over the long term. So when you hear King talk about love, when you hear King talk about nonviolence, these things actually require not just an enormous discipline around the acceptance of suffering as if it's some kind of passive practice, but they require really creative, dedicated thinking around how exactly to push and prod your neighbors into addressing the forms of injustice that structure the polity and how to do it in a way that doesn't leave a kind of perpetual midnight of bitterness when the conflict is done.

I want to pull apart two things in that answer that sometimes get put together, which is the idea of strategic nonviolence and the idea of principle nonviolence.

Can you talk about them?

Sure.

So partly as a response to their discomfort with Christian theology, their enthusiasm for anti-colonial revolution, and a broader skepticism about the influence of some pacifist elements within the civil rights movement.

I think there were many in the student sit-in movement and the student nonviolent movement that tried to introduce this distinction between philosophical and strategic nonviolence.

And so for someone like Stokely Carmichael, he would often say that he supported nonviolence only in so far as it works.

And on that model, you have a positive goal.

And then there's just a question, which is interpretive, empirical, about whether nonviolent practice or violent practice is going to get you to that end.

And you take whatever means are necessary to get to that end.

They try to introduce that distinction as opposed to nonviolence as what they would say is a way of life.

But King, I think, really importantly challenges the legitimacy of that distinction because there's a way in which the strategy question is already shot through with ethical reflection, with philosophical commitments.

And so to raise the question of strategy as if we can evaluate means without some kind of ethical reflection or without some kind of underlying ethical commitments, for King

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is already a confusion.

He thinks that the ends are prefigured in any means.

Gandhi and Henshaw Raj has this great passage where he talks about how you could come to acquire a piece of property.

You could buy it.

You could steal it.

You could kill somebody in pursuit of it.

You could ask for it as a gift.

At the end of the day, you still have the same property, but the thing itself has changed.

In one scenario, it's a piece of stolen property.

It's a theft.

In another, it's a gift, which is different than something you've purchased.

So in the course of acquiring the thing, even though the thing is the same, the means have transformed it in a really, really important way.

And King wants to say something similar, that in all political practice, the ends are prefigured in the means.

And nonviolence has to be, if it's going to be true nonviolence for King, informed by a philosophy of love that really wants and desires and wills goodwill for the enemy at present and is committed at the fundamental level to going on together in peace, going on together, sharing the polity in perpetuity.

So this is a tricky thought to get into a question, but let me try, because it's something my producer, Emma Fun, I've been talking about a lot preparing for this episode.

When you think about somebody's political philosophy or their theory of political action, then maybe think of there being a couple agents they're thinking about.

So there's the person or group you're in conversation or conflict with, right?

You know, I'm a liberal and I'm arguing with a conservative.

And I think that's the most common target to think about.

How do I beat or convince this person or group on the other side?

Then there's the broader community, polity, right, the voters of the country, people who are bystanders, maybe interested, maybe not, but a broader community that is in some way watching or can be brought in to watch.

And then there's you, the person taking the action and how it affects you and your group to take a particular action.

And something that it seems present in King's thought is much, much, much, much more concern and focus than I think most political thinkers have today on how a political action affects you, the person taking it, and affects the broader community that might be watching it.

Does that first track is right to you?

And if so, can you talk a bit about that?

That does track.

And I think for King, imperative to nonviolent resistance turns in large part on the question of your own dignity and self-respect.

So it is a justice question.

He's concerned with structural justice as a matter of the kinds of arrangements that

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prevail in the larger American society.

That's obviously true.

But he's also concerned with how you relate to your own sense of equality, equal standing, worth, as he would say, somebodiness.

We might say dignity.

He also says that a lot.

And that for King to acquiesce in the face of oppression and domination without protest is to abdicate your own self-respect and dignity.

When he gives the speech at the Montgomery Bus Boycott's first open meeting, he's scrambling to try to put it together.

And the task he sets himself is he says right up front, I need to say something that will cause people to see that their dignity is at stake in what we do next and which will commit us to non-violence because for him, dignity also required a certain kind of excellence of character, a certain kind of comportment and practice toward others.

So it is about trying to defend your dignity, defend your self-respect against insult and humiliation, oppression, but it's also about doing so in a way that doesn't degrade your character in the long term, that doesn't cause you to end up being turned away from the good, which again for him is going to be a religiously inflected category, but I think there are secular renderings of it, that ends up with you being turned away from the good and toward things like hatred, resentment, violence, which he thinks ultimately will corrode your soul and take you further away from flourishing.

Something in that feels very present to me in a lot of the debates we've had in the last couple of years around civility politics, around virtue signaling, and it seems to me that there's some important distinction between the idea that you don't want to be taken away from the good yourself and you are frightened or worried or focused on how others will perceive

you as acting.

Sometimes this gets called respectability politics, so that is a broader term, but there's something there where I think it has fallen out of favor, it gets called tone policing sometimes, it has fallen out of favor to say that there are certain ways of acting politically that are better and worse from a virtue perspective, because it often is seen not as really a question of you and your relationship to some baseline or ideal, but as some kind of concession you're making to people who don't deserve the concession.

Well, to answer that, I think we have to go back to where the term politics respectability comes from.

I just think it's very useful to help people understand what might otherwise seem like an idiosyncratic response.

So my colleague Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham wrote a phenomenal book many years ago called *Righteous Discontent*, and that's what introduces the phrase, the politics of respectability.

It's a study of turn of the century black Baptist women and their organizing efforts through the church, and she meant the term to kind of capture two things.

One is the thing that's been picked up and is now called respectability politics, and folks like Ta-Nehisi Coates have been extremely critical of it.

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It's this idea that in confronting a system of social stigma, the response that you need to have to it is to try to adjust your behavior, comportment, your self-fashioning, in line with the dominant norms, so that you can over time undermine the stigma and become a full participant in society.

And there are all sorts of questions, legitimate questions that are raised against that. Are we losing something valuable about alternative forms of life, about alternative cultural practices when we take the existing dominant norms as unassailable or as something to aspire to? Are we losing something in our self-respect and dignity when we don't protest that imposition as unjust and instead just acquiesce or accommodate ourselves to it?

Are we harming people in our communities that for valuable reasons can't adjust themselves or important reasons can't adjust themselves to those norms?

I think all of those are legitimate questions, and if you read King's trumpet of conscience, his Canadian broadcast lectures from the last year of his life, what's really fascinating is that he talks a lot about how he sympathizes with all those criticisms.

He agrees with them.

He supports the counterculture movement in lots of ways.

He celebrates the black radical students who have cast off the kinds of clothing that their forebears once wore as a sign of respectability in favor of jeans and overalls.

But, and here's the other part of Evelyn Higginbotham's formulation, there's a deeper question, one with thousands of years of moral reflection built up into it, which is about virtue ethics, that there's some things that people are appealing to you about that aren't about their effect in the polity, that aren't about trying to manipulate white racial attitudes, they're about your own flourishing in character.

They're deep questions about how to live a good life, how to achieve excellence in the crafting of your soul.

I am a person who believes those questions are still legitimate, that they can't all be reduced to strategy or will to power or psychic drives.

I think that there's something like an ethical life that requires us to argue about it and requires us to think really hard about how we discipline ourselves to achieve it.

And for King, many of the appeals he made in that vocabulary are really about that, they're really about virtue, they're really about what hatred does to your life, what anger does to your life, what violence does to your life.

And one way we can know this is when we look at sermons like his shattered dreams, because King's not naive, he doesn't think they're going to win in his lifetime.

His final speech, the mountaintop speech, he doesn't think he's going to get to the promised land.

So there is a question for him at the core of his life, which is what makes this worth doing.

That's a virtue question.

It's not just a strategic or tactical one in the narrow sense.

The other dimension of that, though, that I think makes it sometimes hard to follow King on this, is that he can seem unreachable or inhuman or like a saint.

He talks a lot about refusing to hate, people who are trying to kill you, who are trying

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to oppress you, who have maybe killed somebody or hurt somebody or beat somebody you love. I mean, it sounds nice, right?

Like I don't want to hate anybody either, but I have trouble not having pretty strongly negative reactions to people who send me a crappy email.

And so what is the applied dimension of his philosophy here, rather than saying that it is a violence that is done to you when somebody is able to lure you into hating them?

Because hatred is something that is corrosive to your soul.

How do you understand King as actually having achieved or attempted to practice that lack of hate?

So let me say two things here.

Again, which kind of bridges the last two questions, is that he describes nonviolence, I think really importantly, as also being about a nonviolence of spirit.

And the example that he often gives is about humiliation.

So that there's a way in which the desire to humiliate others, to diminish their status in front of other people for your own pleasure, the desire to subject them to standards of evaluation that they probably themselves don't hold or don't understand in order to enable mockery.

There's a way in which if we're reflexive about where that desire comes from, we will find that it comes from a place that's irrational, indefensible, and likely cruel.

And that if we were to imagine a way of life built around those feelings, those desires, those practices, it would be one that would make it really hard for us to have healthy social ties, stable institutions, flourishing social relationships.

So part of what he's up to is asking us at all times to be self-reflexive about the desires and needs and fantasies that drive us in politics.

And part of what nonviolence is asking us to do is do these things in a spirit of humility because, as Kings would say, our reason sometimes can become subordinate to our passions.

It can just be a legitimizing power or rationalizing power to the point where we lose track of what we really want to achieve, the kind of character we really want to have.

So what nonviolence does is it builds in a check on those kinds of rationalizations, those kinds of emotional drives by teaching us to avoid forms of humiliation and forms of physical violence that make it hard to come back from.

So that's the first point.

The second point, and it goes more to your sense of revenge and retaliation, is again forcing us to acknowledge the legitimacy of anger.

I don't think Kings against the idea he uses the phrase legitimate anger in the late 60s.

But to be reflexive about it and understand that even in a case where someone kills a loved one of yours, revenge, violence, retaliation, that doesn't bring back the loved one that you've lost.

It doesn't rebuild a world where people won't lose loved ones for horrible reasons.

The only thing that can do that is a kind of forward looking, constructive practice of politics and social ethics.

And so what he's trying to do is raise the question of can we channel our legitimate rage, our legitimate anger into a practice that allows us to maintain our self respect

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because that's one of the things we're worried about is that people have done this thing to us because they don't respect us.

So can we somehow regain our self respect, our sense of somebodiness and move forward a practice of constructive politics that helps shape a world where these evils are less frequent and less likely to happen?

But I want to ask you there about King the Man because this is a place where as a person why I read more Buddhist meditation manuals and I read actual philosophy because I agree with all of this, right?

I can see it.

I can tell myself it.

And then my own ego sloshes over the sides of my cup.

My mental monologue is an endless recitation of arguments that haven't yet happened that I'm defending myself against and slights from five years ago that I feel bad about.

And here's this man who is both making this public argument and trying to get people to follow him in it and put themselves at risk over it and is also living it himself and talks about this unbelievably difficult thing, which is not to not feel righteous anger but to not feel hatred, to internally sort of reflect the world you want externally.

And I'm curious how he practices to that, what you know from him about how he lives a day so that he doesn't feel what I think most of us would understand not only to be natural feelings here but inevitable, like irresistible reactions to the way society and individuals here are treating us.

So let me say three things.

One is a shortcoming of Kings in retrospect, which is that he does falter, he does fail.

And I think when we read biographies of King, when you read the last parts of David Garrow's biography, when you read Cornell West essay from To Shape a New World, which talks a lot about the despair at the end of King's life, if you watch HBO's great documentary King and the Wilderness, you see a person faltering and failing under the pressure.

He's not able, for example, to bring himself to a kind of reconciliation with Malcolm X.

It's too much hurt there of the things that Malcolm has said about him.

He's frustrated with how his allies abandoned him when he came out against the Vietnam War.

By the end of his life, he's drinking a lot more and he's erupting sometimes in forms of disappointment at the people around him.

And there is a question about what would our relationship to King's memory be like if we knew more of that at the time?

And if he hadn't had to project at times a kind of superhuman ethos, whether that was going to be permissible for him or what it would have been like for him to try to open that faltering self up more for reflection, we don't know, but that is an important question.

The other two pieces, though, I think are more in line with what you're asking for.

So one is that I think King himself thinks that the practice of nonviolent politics does the kind of work that you're describing.

And I think he would be worried about the fact that in our time, so much of these questions about the management of emotion, the building of character has become a privatized practice.

He thinks that we learn a lot about how to love other people by confronting them in public,

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by forcing ourselves into uncomfortable situations where we have to endure the look of the other back and forth, where we train ourselves to extend these interactions of contentious politics until they can alter or change the people that we've put our bodies in close contact with on the field of politics.

So I think he does think that that's one way that this really does happen.

And we have lots of evidence from the civil rights movement, personal testimony and personal reflection where this seems to be the case.

And the last thing I'll say is that in order to do that work, in order to do some of the work you're describing, he also is building an alternative community.

So one way that I read that famous final speech, I've seen the promised land.

There's obviously a prophetic reading of it, but there's also one where he's describing the prefiguration of the promised land in the kind of politics and social life he's participated in over his career, that the promised land is seen in the union politics in Memphis.

It's seen in the student nonviolent coordinating committee gathering to do Mississippi Freedom Summer.

It's seen in the people walking for 350 plus days in Montgomery, Alabama and banding together to help each other out.

That is the promised land.

And when you are in a community that's constantly talking with each other and lifting each other up and engaging in practices like song, prayer, other communal rituals to try to affirm this alternative set of ethical and political commitments against the whole rest of the culture.

That's the only way it can be done is that you have to have an alternative form of social life that can sustain you in that work.

The private practice isn't going to do it.

This may seem weird, but I want to thank you for the first point there.

And it's something true about the book you co-edited to.

I find it very comforting and very helpful to hear about the places where King fall short.

The saintliness of him sometimes puts both his practice and his thinking out of reach in a way that I don't think is useful.

When you look at the principles of nonviolence on Stanford's King Institute, I think a bunch of them would be familiar to people.

You can resist evil without resorting to violence.

You seek to win the friendship and understanding of the opponent, not to humiliate.

But the last one says that the nonviolent resistor must have, quote, a deep faith in the future, that they should have a conviction that the universe is on the side of justice.

How imaginable is King's philosophy, is his practice, without his deep Christianity, without a belief in redemption, in salvation, in the possibility of a next life?

Well, again, I go back to the sermon he gave, and it's collected in Strength to Love, and it's called Shattered Dreams.

Where he confronts a problem that is all over the black tradition, which is that the struggle we're engaged in has gone on in some form or another for hundreds of years.

At the moments of its greatest promise, you can look over the course of history and see

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just years later, we find ourselves in situations that are unimaginably awful.

And King is not naive.

He's a student of history.

He's somebody who asks himself hard questions like this, and he gives two different kinds of answers.

And one is the answer that you've mentioned here, which is a theological answer.

It's a kind of conventional theodicy story that look at the end of the day, God is at work in the world, and God is on the side of justice.

And we may not know exactly how the arc of the moral universe is going to bend, and we won't be there when it reaches justice, perhaps, but that is a thing we can have faith in.

That cosmic story is going to play out the way we want.

There's another way that he goes at it, however.

And for me, I read it as rooted in a different kind of project, one that combines what used to be called philosophical anthropology, which is just a way of saying philosophical reflections on what kind of beings we are.

It's rooted in that, and it's rooted in politics, and I think those things can find lots of overlapping consensus from people outside of the Christian tradition.

What you have to be committed to in the last instance is that evil is not the totality of who we are as persons, that people have the capacity, emotionally and rationally, to reflect on their life plans, their practices, their commitments and change them, maybe not all of them, maybe not all at once, but that those things can be changed.

And that politics is really a field where contingency is the key word, that although there are structural constraints and everything can't be done at every moment, that the unprecedented,

the new, the unexpected happens in this realm.

And the only way that we can confirm that nothing new will happen, that oppression will last forever, that the future bears no hope, is if we don't act.

That's the only way we can confirm that it's true for all time, is by failing to act in pursuit of justice.

And that's King's view, I think.

And to me, that's the persuasive one, that in our action, we might be able to see some measure of justice from a complicated, complex swirl of contingencies.

And to move the ball forward, we will inevitably fail, but to look back on that failure with maturity and try to do better the next time.

I'm Lulu Garcia Navarro, the host of First Person from New York Times Opinion.

On the show, I talk to all sorts of people about the experiences that shape their beliefs.

Some of my friends got shamed and called out in school board meetings.

You start wondering, oh, is this going to happen to me?

Beliefs that can be polarizing, but the emotions behind them are central to understanding the world we live in.

Oh, yeah, I've had my concealed weapon, and I've had a gun on me.

But now, in my later age, switching over to a classroom, that's a whole new ballgame.

I want to explore opinion in all of its complexity, and every opinion starts with a story.

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I'm going to ask you this, because this is a very volatile period, and you decide to become a politician.

I really want to understand how that happened.

I mean, what inspired you to run for office?

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You mentioned Ta-Nasi Coates a couple of minutes ago, and I think sometimes when I think about nonviolence, about something he said to me in a conversation we did during the George Floyd protests, where he said, quote,

The people who are called on to be nonviolent are the people with the ability to do the least amount of damage, whereas we don't call upon those who have the most power and actually can do the most damage.

And there is this way in which king and nonviolence gets weaponized by the powerful against the powerless.

You need to be nonviolent, but nonviolence has no relationship to me.

It's not something we ask of states.

It's not something that the million, not literally million, but the many members of Congress who wield king on the floor ever think about how to apply to the laws coming out of their chamber.

How do you think about that?

How do you think about the question of the weaponization of nonviolence and then the applicability of its principles to the powerful and to what they might, we might, the state might learn from it?

I take my inspiration on this question from King's agonizing over what he should say about the Vietnam War and just a heart-wrenching decision because on the one hand, you have in Lyndon Johnson, the president who's done the most to advance the cause of civil rights, who's speaking forthrightly about the problem of racial inequality in a way that's essentially unprecedented for the American presidency.

And at the same time, he's prosecuting a horrifically unjust war.

And there were many people, Harold Cruz famously wrote this, but others even closer to King who said, you're not the leader of Vietnam, you're the leader of the African-American civil rights movement.

You should not speak out on this war because you'll lose your relationship with Johnson.

And King says that the people who are advising him this way, they just don't know him, his commitment or his calling.

They don't understand that if he's going to raise his voice against violence in Watts or Detroit, that he's got to raise it against what he called the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today, his own government.

And I think that fits with a broader understanding of his political philosophy, which is about a kind of intensive critique of the ways in which we resort to violence as a ready-at-hand answer to all manner of social problems.

So for him, the question was really one about militarism and the way that violence gets imagined as this kind of hard-headed, realistic, hyper-rational response to international disputes and social problems abroad when in actuality, if we take stock of what he called the casualties of war,

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the spiritual ones and the material ones, we would realize that most of the violence we engage in at the foreign policy level is counterproductive.

It's created more problems and more harms than it ever has seemed to solve.

This is one of the powerful interventions that you see in Lionel McPherson's essay on To Shape a New World.

It's just this idea that this is about hard-headed realism is mythic.

Everything says it's about a kind of immature image that we are nurturing for ourselves, that we're trying to shore up this idea of ourselves as some kind of crusading hero or all-powerful world power while not taking stock of all of the things about our freedoms, about our way of life, about our connectedness as a society, about our social divisions that war has exacerbated.

Not to mention the violence that's prosecuted abroad.

And he says similar things about domestic policy, the ways in which our politics toward poor families, single parent households is punitive for reasons that aren't justified, that our response to what he calls the derivative crimes of the ghetto are wildly out of proportion and unjust compared to how we treat the systematic crimes of exploitation, segregation, disenfranchised

movement that structure much of ghetto life.

So I'm in total agreement with Coates on that question.

I just think that part of why that phenomenon that he's describing is allowed to stand is because people still to this day do not know King's commitment or his calling.

They don't read the work.

So I've spent most of my adult life covering policy and policymaking and the ends of policymaking and the means of policymaking and what people are trying to achieve.

And it often strikes me that one of the challenges from nonviolence is about this question of what you're attempting to do, both to yourself, which is something I think the government never thinks about.

What does the application of a policy mean for what kind of government or what kind of state it becomes?

What does it mean for the people due to the people who carry it out?

And then what are you actually trying to achieve more broadly in the community?

And on the first level, it just seems, I don't want to call it axiomatic, but a repeated lesson that the more willing you become to use violence as a state, the more it corrupts you, the more violent you become as a state.

And to some degree, the more violent the people you are policing, the people you are occupying become, and I'm not a pacifist, I don't believe you can fully eradicate violence.

But we don't weigh how violent we make others in our actions very well, and then how violent we become in response, how much we enter into that escalatory dynamic.

But then the other thing is this question of this broader community of changing hearts, of changing minds, of acting upon people not through punishment, but through our belief that they can alter.

And I'd be curious to reflect on that question of community a little bit, because I think one of the central debates of our time is who's actually in the community, right?

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And a lot of policy is actually about writing people outside of the community, a lot of our political fights about who should be let into the conversation.

What would it mean to have a bit more of King's view of trying to create community at the center of what the state is attempting to do as it fashions and helps govern a country?

So one underappreciated feature from King's famous Riverside Church speech against Vietnam, he goes on this whole riff about America lacking maturity.

And it's a weird thing to have in a foreign policy speech, you're used to your policy person.

You know, you don't usually hear the word maturity banded about in these kinds of debates.

But what he's getting at is that something like really tightly linked to violence that violence always exceeds the original justification you have for it.

It's not precise.

It's not able to be easily targeted as we think it spirals out, it produces retaliation and then we retaliate again and all the while it's expanding its justifications to the point of absurdity.

And King describes that as a kind of adding cynicism to the process of death.

And he says that maturity is one of the only ways out here, that the maturity to be able to stand up and say we were wrong, we want to make amends, we want to repair evils committed in our name.

Those are questions that are essentially non-starters and American politics right now, certainly about foreign policy, but even in some places in domestic policy, you're starting to get some of this in the attempted wind down of mass incarceration.

This isn't something that you would hear, for example, in welfare reform debates or something like that.

King calling us to maturity and that being really crucial to the politics of non-violence, again, being about self-reflective activity and about trying to take ownership of the things that you've done wrong, that the goal to do no harm has been, is something that we've fallen short of.

That feature of King's thinking is something that I always want to draw attention to, because I think it's something we ignore.

So that's the first point I want to make.

The second thing, and this is also really deeply seated in that Vietnam speech, one of the reasons that people hated it so much, he was attacked in the New York Times, basically every editorial page in the country, one of the reasons people hated that speech so much is that he spent so much time expressing solidarity and sympathy with Ho Chi Minh and North Vietnamese forces.

We're engaged in war with these people.

How could you express sympathy or some kind of solidarity with the enemy?

And it's very instructive how King went about it.

He wasn't one of these people, I mean, you've seen these images of people waving the North Vietnamese flag at counterculture protest, it wasn't like that.

It was him really spending a lot of time meditating on the reasons why we had ended up in this

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conflict, narrating the whole history of our failure to support Ho Chi Minh and the struggle against French colonialism, against Chinese colonialism, and how that had led to the situation we were in by 1967.

King is narrating this history.

He's also trying to get people to think about what it must feel like to be on the ground in Vietnam and witness these bombings, witness this imposition of terror.

And he's doing that because at the bottom, he's inspired by a vision really rooted in the parable of the Good Samaritan from the Bible that everyone is our neighbor, that there are no sectional loyalties that should eviscerate our moral obligations to others, our obligation to show them respect, to go on and community with them, and that most of what goes on in foreign policy and particularly war-making is a bad faith evasion of the fact that we're all interconnected.

And King didn't even have the luxury of speaking about climate change the way we do, the ways in which the COVID pandemic has exposed some of the deep ways we're connected.

But he understood that there's a fundamental interconnectedness amongst humanity at the ethical level and at the material structural level, and that war-making is an evasion of that fact.

We're going to have to live together.

So the chief question that should organize it is how can we do so in peace?

We've been talking about kings and nonviolence.

I want to talk about his economic thought, but I want to do it from this perspective of his continued attention to what different politics and practices and policies and conditions due to people's souls.

He's a line where he says, quote, the dignity of the individual will flourish when the decision is concerning his life or in his own hands, when he has the assurance that his income is stable and certain, and when he knows that he has a means to seek self-improvement.

Personal conflicts between husband, wife, and children will diminish when the unjust measurement of human worth on a scale of dollars is eliminated.

Tell me a bit about the spiritual and psychological dimensions of King's economic philosophy in organizing.

Well, for King, the question of poverty and the question of economic inequality are both questions of dignity and democracy, and the questions of dignity because when you live without the adequate means to really enjoy the fair value of your basic rights, when you live in a society, and this is a really important point for King, when you live in a society of profound affluence like the United States and you live in severe poverty, it expresses a kind of contempt from your fellow citizens about your standing as an equal member of the polity.

So separate from the plain material fact of hunger or health care, there's this additional spiritual concern with the way in which living with nothing, living on a lonely island amidst an ocean of prosperity, as he would put it, diminishes your dignity and makes it hard for you to remain tethered to the fact that you are somebody, that you matter in the world, that your rights are inviolable, that you have the same kind of equal worth as other people.

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So that's that piece of it.

And then another piece, so this is kind of the bridging of the dignity and democracy question, is that when people don't have a say in the core vital interest of their life, when they have no decision making power over the processes which determine how their life is going to go, that too is a diminishment of their dignity.

And King, who's operating in a long tradition of social democracy, wants to expand democratic practices to the broader economic realm.

So he has this really curious passage, but I think it fits with his political philosophy.

And where do we go from here?

He talks about how tenants unions and welfare rights unions are these extraordinary inventions in the history of democracy.

Why democracy?

Well, because they're making something like the administration of government benefits, the housing market and fair housing opportunities, subject to the deliberative input and democratic contestation of the people who enjoy them, the people who are subject to them, without expanding democracy into that economic realm for King, we're both making a mockery of democracy and we're diminishing the dignity of citizens who live in search of a real standing as free and equal.

This seems like a very lost way of thinking to me.

And I don't want to say nobody today is doing it, that would be wrong.

But as somebody who spends a lot of my time in debates about economic policy, I think it is fair to say that the ends of economics are taken as the economy, typically.

People hopefully shouldn't starve.

But a lot of debates about what we should do, even for the poor, become this sort of recursive, well, how can they better participate in the economy and how are they going to be able to invest in themselves and how will there be opportunity, economic opportunity for their children, and the idea that the economy is subservient to the community, that the point of the economy is the community, that should be measured, our policy should be measured by what they do for democratic participation, for the dignity of individuals, is pretty lost.

I mean, if anything, I see it more now on like the post-liberal right, as people call it, than I even do among mainline democrats.

And it just seems to me to be a very important and correct part of King's thought that is, I think if you asked people about it, they would say they believe it.

But it has fallen out of favor as a way to frame and think about these conversations.

Yeah.

I mean, I think it's rooted in some really complicated things.

I think there's a kind of liberal anxiety about speaking forthrightly about the fact that living in areas of severe concentrated disadvantage and racial segregation that we call ghettos diminishes the dignity of the people who live there.

That feels uncomfortable for people to say forthrightly in the way that King would.

And so we try to get around it by speaking about opportunity and the wealth gap and unemployment statistics.

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But really what people are feeling is an existential assault on dignity.

I think we also, and my colleague Elizabeth Hinton, dear friend, in her first book from *The War on Poverty to The War on Crime*, one way to read that book is to say that she's telling a kind of tragic story about the loss of a particular ideal that guided great society politics, and that's the principle of maximum feasible participation.

That was an idea that was a really social democratic idea, this idea that, well, we need to empower all sorts of people to participate in policymaking and democratic deliberation, and that part of where people will find self-respect and dignity is through engagement in politics and their community all the way up, and that even bureaucracies should not be impervious to democratic deliberation and democratic decision making for very complicated reasons, particularly about the turn to a punitive impulse and social policy, fear of black radicalism, the urban rebellions, the economic crises of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

For those reasons, that ideal was defeated in that moment, but we've lost something really profound in our mockery of it and our easy dismissal of it.

I think, again, returning to King's work, where it's so front and center, allows us to enrich this conversation, and I'll just say one last thing here.

One way you might think about it is that when Bernie Sanders came out, we got to hear the words democratic socialism over and over again, but there was a lot more interest in what makes it socialist than what makes it democratic.

For me, King is really interesting because if he's in that tradition, the thing he's most exciting and innovative about is actually the democratic part, and that's the part where even the people who operate under that label have fallen short.

I think that's a really, really sharp point, and I think it gets to something that is very present towards the end of King's life, which is his sense that there is something important for the civil rights movement in the labor movement.

Because on some level, they are mechanisms of democracy.

One of the most important functions they have is workplace democracy.

Can you talk a bit about both the bridges he was building, but also the connections that he was drawing?

Well, sure.

King is in this tradition in many ways, inspired by a mentor of his and one of the most important figures in American history, but one of the most severely neglected was A. Philip Randolph, the great labor leader, former organizer of the Pullman Porters, the architect of both, the March on Washington that gets canceled, which was going to target the Roosevelt administration

during World War II, and the 1963 famous March on Washington for jobs and freedom.

He's following Randolph in lots of ways because they've got a certain set of commitments.

The one is the idea that because most African Americans are working class or poor, anything that advances the interest of working class people and their ability to exercise democratic control over the economy is going to advance the interests of African Americans.

Now, in our moment, that's become more complicated as the class stratification of African Americans

has intensified.

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But in the 1960s, you could see why King and Randolph were so adamant and Bayard Rustin were so adamant about this point.

They also, though, were extremely critical of the labor movement for its history of racial discrimination.

If you study the history of labor unions in the 20th century, late 19th century, you'll see that it's just utterly shot through with exclusions based on race, complicated institutionally racist practices about seniority that really disadvantaged Black people.

The constant prodding and poking of the labor movement by Randolph, by King, by Rustin, by Ella Baker, by folks like that really enacted over time an important set of changes in the labor movement.

I've written a little bit about this in an essay, a new labor forum with my friend and labor organizer, Jason Lee.

But the last thing I'll say, and I think is probably the most interesting thing, is that for King, labor unions are also, as you described, important laboratories of democracy.

So they're one of the few places where people from all walks of life can get together, deliberate about strategy, deliberate about social ends, social goods, put money behind things that they value that aren't only their own material interests.

They also allow for forms of nonviolent contestation.

So the strike, the sit-down strike, where the sit-ins take their inspiration from.

The boycott, unions in a lot of ways are one of the original laboratories for the ideas that come to be associated with the civil rights movement.

King knows this, acknowledges this, and thinks a lot about how we can sustain union participation in an era, his era, where the threat of automation was looming so largely on the horizon.

One of the just extraordinary tragedies of King's death is that he's only 39.

I'm 38.

I'm coming into 39 fast.

I just turned 39 two weeks ago.

Congratulations.

And I'm still learning a lot.

I'm still changing a lot.

And there's such an unfinishedness to him and his work that I think also reverberates in how he gets used today.

So today, of course, there's this ongoing, always is this ongoing argument of, should you have race-based politics, or is that unusable, doesn't work, creates too much backlash?

You should have class-based politics that are looking for commonalities.

And because you've had so much economic disadvantage for black Americans, that'll work through the mechanism of class just fine.

And there's this looking at what King is doing at the end of his life with the poor people's campaign and deeper focus on economic justice and often the shared plight of poor white and poor black Americans.

And that kind of view that I think you sometimes hear, like a drawing of a line forward, right?

If he had been around, he would have come down on, particularly if you're somebody who believes we should have a class-based politics, he would have come down on my side of the debate.

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That's where he was going.

How do you understand his thinking about those two approaches?

And how do you understand where he was going?

So King often invokes the philosopher Hegel because he's constantly describing his mode of thinking as a dialectical one, where he's trying to reconcile seeming opposites and produce a new synthesis, which helps you transcend certain intractable problems.

Now as a reading of Hegel that has much to be desired, but as a description of Martin Luther King's thought, I think that's always a good way to understand what he's up to.

And so I think what he's always trying to do is kind of transcend that opposition.

And there's a way to transcend it that I want to resist, and I think it's really important to resist.

So I think there's a way in which we sometimes will say class-based politics works to lift African Americans because they're disproportionately poor.

And what's tricky about that is that it doesn't really theorize what to do about the African American middle class and the African American elite.

So a thing that King was thinking a lot about and when he wrote *Stride Toward Freedom* and the Montgomery Bus Boycott is there are areas where racial solidarity is going to be really effective and probably indispensable.

So where questions of anti-black racism emerge, where questions of racial humiliation, stigma that really affects the larger group, things that all black people feel vulnerable to, those are going to be areas like the segregation laws on the buses.

Those are going to be areas where you actually can generate a lot of racial solidarity and do a lot of important work with it, especially as a defensive posture.

When you start to get into questions of political economy, however, you have to be careful because the appeal to racial solidarity can actually obscure the fact that black people don't all share the same material interest in lots of ways.

I'm from Maryland originally.

I think this is a great laboratory to study this kind of thing.

When Ben Jealous ran for governor in Maryland, he was destroyed in part by being painted as a socialist.

And the black middle class located in the DC suburbs did not rally to his support because their material interests were not aligned with a radical redistribution of wealth in the same way.

This is a feature of American politics that has changed dramatically from King's era.

And any of our kind of race or class-based politics discussions have to confront that head on.

So what I think King's primary principle always is, is that he's dedicated to the group that William Julius Wilson called the truly disadvantaged, the least of these, that at the end of the day, he's going to give everything to the people who are in the most desperate situation, the poor, and that's going to guide his politics.

So where that is enabled by a race-based solidarity, so in questions of policing perhaps, or questions of social stigma and media discourse, that's where he'll turn.

But in other cases, I think he'd really be trying to experiment with a form of politics

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that empowers the poor to take leadership on their own, to take a part in political action and policymaking, and that really puts as its first principle the amelioration and elimination of poverty.

I always want to avoid asking anyone to channel a deceased thinker.

I don't think it's a fair question.

But we have this period we've been in, you know, where there are these huge fights over what got called wokeness, and then I think anti-racism or in a different version, critical race theory, and I mean, there are better and worse faith versions of those discussions. But one of the better faith ones, I think, which gets to something you were just talking about is whether there's a tendency for these conversations to get captured away from a focus on material outcomes, particularly for the least well-off, and pushed towards representation, particularly in elite spaces, sort of symbolic politics that sometimes gets called virtue signaling, you know, social media, activism.

And I'm curious to somebody who has been deeply marinated in King's thought, not what you think he would have made of it, but what he has helped you make of it.

How does being more aware of the distinctions he drew and the decisions he made help you look at some of the past we should be walking down today and are not in these conversations or are walking down and shouldn't be?

So you know, I do want to be clear, and maybe in a way that wasn't exactly precise in my last answer, that the critique of racism does have important work to do in the pursuit of economic justice.

So in order for us to understand why so many African Americans are located in the realm of the most disadvantaged and the strata of the most disadvantaged, you have to understand the history of racial domination in this country.

You have to understand the persistence of racial discrimination, especially in labor markets, and you have to understand the ways that racial ideology allows us to obscure the nature of our economy.

So I mean, the most classic example is that structural unemployment gets reframed by racism as questions of laziness, or pathology, or criminality, instead of as a feature of the economy as such.

So King always talks about the critique of racism as part of the diagnosis of the disease in order to cure it.

So even in the privileging the least well-off and being concerned with poor people of all races, he wants to say that the critique of racism helps us see through the kinds of blindnesses that obscure the nature of our economy and the commonalities across race, and the things that we need to know to address the questions of economic justice precisely.

So that's the first thing.

The second thing is that in his critique of black power, one of the things he says is that he worries that black power gives priority to the question of race in a way that confuses our analysis of social reality.

So what does he mean by that?

Well, if you think that all black disadvantage is primarily about anti-black racism, you can start to miss the fact that there are broader economic dislocations that need to

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be addressed, that there are structural features of the American constitutional order, ways in which municipal boundaries are structured, ways that funding decisions are made that aren't primarily driven by racial animus that need to be addressed.

You can lose sight of those things and start to think that the real battle is in something like a kind of totality of anti-black racial ideology that can be battled in Hollywood movies and comic books and school curricula and legislation and political rhetoric.

So it's not to say that those things don't exist, it's just to say that there's a kind of confusion about what's going to make the biggest impact in improving the life circumstances of the least well-off.

And I think King really calls us to constantly be very precise about what the causal mechanisms are for black disadvantage and to not be confused by the fact that there's discrimination and injustice and cruelty in these other realms, but which might not have as much causal impact as some of these other things.

The last thing I'll say, which I want to end on because I don't want to sound like I'm just totally disparaging this critique of representation and these things, King was very adamant that black pride, that a concern with representation, that thinking in expansive ways about how do you affirm the somebodiness of black youth, that those things are really, really important and that they're not to be dismissed.

So it is a question of justice if people in Hollywood just constantly demean or diminish the talent of non-white actors.

That is a question of justice.

It's just that we have to be honest about what the import of those struggles will be for the broader group.

And the only way we can do that is by being attentive to the class differences within the group.

I want to ask a version of the question from the other side now, which is, I heard you say something that I find interesting, which is that studying black nationalism and the civil rights era had given you a lot of insight into what's going on on the right today.

Tell me a bit about what you mean by that.

I think there are lots of ways you could take it, but I'll focus on one thing that I've been thinking quite a lot about, and it goes back to part of our earlier conversation on the problem of hope, futurity, the problem of humiliation.

And there's a way in which, and King diagnoses this very incisively, there's a way in which some genres of black nationalism are so pessimistic about the possibility for multiracial democracy in the United States, for any kind of black flourishing in the United States, that they essentially foreclose real interest in political organizing and social movements.

But the energy they still manage to generate, the outrage, the sentiment, the sociality, they find their outlet instead in a kind of practice of humiliation, a counter humiliation.

So that there may not be hope that we can actually change the country, but at the very least, we can enjoy a feeling of retaliation, a kind of self-respecting sense of resistance by engaging in a practice of trying to humiliate our opponents in the public sphere, to mock them, to make bombastic claims about the conspiratorial things that they're up to.

And there's a titillation to that.

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There's a catharsis and watching someone, at that point, it would have been called stick it to whitey.

Now it would be stick it to the libs or own the libs, right?

So for me, I see those similar political emotions at work in a group of people who I think don't have really much hope that Donald Trump is going to change America or that the movement they're a part of is going to fundamentally change the structure of the world so that it could bring back places that have been destroyed by globalization and offshoring and predatory capital.

They don't really think that any of that's going to change.

But they're finding an outlet for their feelings of resentment and retaliation in this performance of counter-humiliation.

Now the danger is that unlike the Black Nationalist movement, and I want to make clear, I don't mean all of the Black Nationalist movement, there are many currents that have nothing to do with the kind of thing I'm describing.

But unlike that movement, which is always going to be small and easily repressed, this is a significant amount of people that could cause real damage in the places where they don't face many countervailing forms of power.

And they can exercise a much more toxic impact on the broader state of American politics in a time where the media environment's way more fragmented, when, as you've written about quite powerfully, the country's much more polarized, and the polarization is in part geographically sorted.

So I see those elements, and I think that we need more people operating in the kind of mode that King did in his critique of Black Power to try to turn people away from their understandable feelings of hostility and resentment toward more productive forms of political engagement.

I think something I want to draw to that in this conversation is actually the word emotion, which is a neglected part of politics, maybe of King's thought in particular, is that he understood, I think he understood, part of the goal of politics and political action as creating a particular structure of political emotion.

And so I'm curious as we end here, how you would just distill that down, and then what you would say when you look at what we have today, the left and the right today, our politics today, what structure of emotion, of political emotion, we're actually living in?

My mentor and friend Karuna Mantina at Columbia Political Theorist, a brilliant political theorist working on a book on Gandhi, I've learned this from her thinking a lot about how nonviolence is a kind of realism, in part because it doesn't engage in the kind of fiction that politics is operating on the model of rational discussion.

It takes very, very, very seriously the problem of emotion.

And for King, thinking about the history of racial oppression in America, they're kind of key emotions that you have to think about.

One of the most important ones is fear, that you can go back to Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, you constantly are getting expressions of a fear of black retaliation and revenge, that the moment black people take power, the moment black people get a foot off their necks, they're going to do to us what we've done

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to them.

If that fear is a long standing, deeply structuring feature of American culture and political life, if it's something that animates our comedy movies, our stand-up routines, our political discourse, you can't operate as if it's not there.

You have to do things that will somehow disarm, disrupt, dispel those fears in order to make progress on the political questions you want to pursue.

That was one of King's deepest, deepest commitments.

He's thinking a lot about anger, which we've talked at great length about.

One of the disappointments I've had with radical politics and the present, as sympathetic as I am to most of the aims, is that I just don't think the emotion question has been adequately considered, that people often defend their politics as like, King was unpopular and the things we're saying are unpopular, so we're operating in that tradition.

Well, it's not enough to just say, I've started a conversation, I've provoked something toxic in the culture.

He's not trying to do that necessarily.

He's trying to elicit reactions that bring forward certain emotions, but not let those emotions unravel the society itself.

He's trying to channel them into other forms of political affect that are much more congenial to reconciliation and justice.

Informal politics and mainstream, democratic politics, mainstream Republican politics, what we've unfortunately ended up with is that the sophistication of mobilization strategists, the depth of the polarization has made anger the principal affect of American politics at this moment.

So much of what I think a King inspired political philosophy, both at the state level and the activist level has to do is think about how do we transform the recalcitrant nature of today's political anger and channel it into forms of constructive politics that might point toward a more just future and that might dissolve the forms of anger that are illegitimate and ill-founded, in part by doing the kind of work sometimes described as a moral jujitsu, turning those affects against themselves, in part to try to transform them into something different.

I'm so glad I asked that question, you got that answer, and I want to say two things about it, which is one that I think it's easy to say that's wise, but what it is I think more is challenging, and maybe it'll be easier to use myself as an example here.

When I started out in blogging and political writing and journalism, particularly blogging, I think I thought a lot about politics in terms of winning and losing and in my corner of it, winning and losing intellectually, that I was involved in political arguments and arguments could be won or lost in front of some kind of audience.

Two things have begun to corrode for me that sense.

One is having been in a lot of arguments, and I think I'm a reasonably good arguer, and so I've done by my own lights well, and then noticed I didn't have it all the effect I wanted it to have, which is if anything, usually, if you really beat somebody in an argument and they feel humiliated, they go further into views they already held.

They don't come to you.

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If you really make them feel bad, then they go to the people who will still make them feel good, and so you kind of lose by winning, and then the second is, particularly in the Trump era, the sense that if you met something awful with the equal and opposite energetic force, that in some weird way, you just added energy to what was now a kind of awful system and conversation, and not to say you shouldn't add some energy to it, but it often, it seemed to me to sidestep this question of how do you leach energy out of it?

What do you do to not create a sense that this is the right conversation to be having, and I don't know the answers to it, and I'm not saying I've ascended to some higher plane and don't argue or any of that.

I have all the same intuitions and senses I've always had, but that's why I find King so interesting and challenging in this way, because it's just really, really, really different to ask the question, how do I reshape the emotional politics and the emotional structure of myself, of the people I am in conflict with, and then of the people who are bystanders or watchers of that conflict for the better, is just a really different goal to be targeting and just unimaginably harder than, can I come up with an argument that I think is a winning argument?

I think you see it, when he's assassinated, the leading figures of the Black Power generation, they're heartbroken.

They mourn his loss.

They grieve for him in part because, and you can read any of these memoirs, particularly Stokely Carmichael's, they felt like he never, that even when he disagreed with them, he loved them, and not just because they were friendly, but because he loved in the sense that he always invoked agape love, that he wanted goodwill for them, and that his arguments weren't from a place of trying to humiliate them or embarrass them or expose them as ridiculous. He wanted to affirm their right to make the arguments they were making, to affirm their intelligence and judgment, and to enter into their mind to try to reconstruct a position with sympathy, but then show why it falls short for the sake of goals that he was forthright about, about justice, about reconciliation, about love, those essays where he's criticizing Black Power.

To me, they're like, I wish my students could spend all their time with those essays and think about how to persuade, how to argue.

Now, I will say, we are in a moment of extraordinary cynicism, and cynicism can take advantage of your intellectual honesty, your practice of agape love.

But I think that's in the short term.

In my better moments, I'm of the view that the only way to start to turn the tide against the cynicism that has so corroded and corrupted our political culture is to try to have these demonstrations of humility and authenticity that cause us to put ourselves at some risk the way that King did.

It's not clear to me how else you get out of a death spiral of mutually reinforcing cynicism.

I think that's a lovely place to end.

So always our final question, what are three books you would recommend to the audience?

And if I can put one spin on that, you mentioned the many books King wrote.

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If people want to start with one thing he actually wrote to read, one book, which one should they start with?

That's a hard one.

I would probably say, I think you get the best sense of his mature thought from his 1967 book, *Where Do We Go From Here, Chaos or Community*, which is still our question. So I would definitely recommend that.

I also really love *Trumpet of Conscience*, his Canadian broadcasting corporation lectures that were published posthumously.

And then three books, and I'll keep it on a King theme for the holiday.

I really strongly recommend Paniel Joseph's *The Sword and the Shield*.

It's a dual biography of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

I reviewed it for the *New York Review of Books* and think really highly of it.

It's a great meditation on the ways they influenced each other, and it gives you a good sense of the broader intellectual milieu of the period.

I also really like Gian Theoharis' more beautiful and terrible history.

I think for people coming to the study of the civil rights movement for the first time or kind of curious about why some of the things that I've said don't sound familiar to them, she writes in a really accessible and intelligent way about some of the myths, the structure, how that history is taught and popularly conveyed.

We have a lot of agreements there.

And then kind of where do we go from here question, I want to recommend my colleague Tommy Shelby's book, *Dark Ghettos*, which is a King-inspired philosophical reflection on the deep structure of ghetto poverty and what it requires of us as a society to do to redress it.

It's a book that's very demanding on how far we fall in short and questions of justice that pertain to the kind of neighborhoods that we grew up in and around.

And that also raises really important questions about how to understand the forms of dissent that emerge out of the ghetto and that may not always appear to be dissent at first glance.

And it's a very charitable and thoughtful and sympathetic reading, again, inspired by King's political philosophy.

Brandon Terry, thank you so much.

Thank you so much, Ezra, it's an honor.

The Ezra Klein Show is produced by Emma Fagabou, Annie Galvin, Jeff Geld, Roger Karma, and Kristen Lin.

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